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Private companies' engagement in the labour market integration of refugees: An exploratory study of the city of Stuttgart, Germany

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Abstract

Private companies of all sizes may engage in the integration of refugees into the labour market. Taking the case study of the highly industrialised German city of Stuttgart, this study explores the motivation of (a) private large-scale international enterprises including (automotive and high-tech companies) and (b) family-owned small- to medium-sized companies (private social enterprises, suppliers to the automotive industries, architecture, and engineering companies) to do so. The research further explores the companies' challenges, opportunities and the lessons learned throughout the process. Utilising the principles of Grounded Theory, a qualitative case study approach is applied with in-depth interviews with private companies, civil society, public private partnerships and experts. The findings show that the arrival of a large number of refugees during 2015/2016 has increased the engagement of the companies, increased their cooperation with other sectors, and has correspondingly led to some *innovative initiatives* in refugees' labour market integration and policy advocacy. The call for the engagement of the private sector and the existence of employment-related policies such as tolerated work permits (Ausbildungsduldung/Beschäftigungsduldung) were essential to create

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sufficient incentives for private companies to engage in the training and employment of refugees. However, the insecure residence permits and bureaucratic procedures in the public sector mostly discouraged their engagement. Our research shows that the two company types had different possibilities, different approaches towards refugees and faced different challenges while engaging in refugee labour market integration.

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, displaced persons and refugees are supported by highly diverse actors including individual volunteers, teachers, politicians, and public, private, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) (Danış & Nazlı, 2019; Hesse et al., 2019; Hinger, 2016; Stürner et al., 2020). The literature has so far almost exclusively focussed on the role of the public sector and CSOs in the integration policy and practices for refugees (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019; Embiricos, 2020; Schammann et al., 2021; van Selm, 2003; Yilmaz, 2019). Exceptions are Müller (2021); Schmidt and Müller (2021) and Omata (2012) who studied the role of the private sector concerning the conception of citizenship, compared workplace integration of refugees with former labour migrants, and the role of the private sector in refugee livelihood in the context of a developing country, respectively. The lack of studies on the role of private companies¹ and the absence of private companies in refugee integration is also noted in existing literature (Omata, 2012; Schmidt & Müller, 2021; United Nations University, 2014). However, with the arrival of a large number of refugees during 2015/2016, private companies have received attention as active actors, with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)² and national governments in the United States, Europe, and Germany calling upon the private sector as a key actor and inviting them to take part in the reception and integration of refugees (Müller, 2021). For instance, in June 2016, the US government launched a “Call to Action”³ for the engagement of private companies in the global refugee crisis. This call focussed on three impact areas including education, employment, and enabling and increasing financial support for humanitarian activities. In Europe in 2019, the World Bank Group came together with the Confederation of Danish Industry and the European Investment Bank to emphasise the role of the private companies in refugee integration and to initiate the programme “Private companies 4 Refugees”⁴ intending to promote the involvement of the private sector in employment, entrepreneurship, investment and services for refugees and host communities. Germany, as a major recipient of the refugees within the European Union (EU), is often named as a case where sectors cooperated successfully in labour market integration. In 2015, the German government appealed to its 30 largest companies to take a role in the labour market integration of refugees (Müller, 2021). After that, labour market actors have started offering a variety of measures, which sometimes have gone beyond labour market integration (Aumüller, 2016; Brückner et al., 2019; Müller, 2021). This has been attributed to pressure from media, the public and employees, as well as social responsibility, showing solidarity, etc. By yielding to this pressure companies improve their image, and only to a lesser extent their labour market needs (Emerllahu, 2017; Müller, 2021; Müller & Schmidt, 2016). These few existing studies have primarily examined the engagement of large companies and their contributions.

In 2015, almost half a million asylum applications were filed in Germany which increased further and reached its peak at 745,545 persons in 2016. However, due to the EU agreements with Turkey and a few other bilateral agreements, the number sharply decreased to 222,683 in 2017, and it continued to gradually decrease to 185,853 in 2018, 165,938 in 2019, and reached its lowest level at 122,170 during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In 2021, however, the number of asylum seekers started to increase to 190,816 and the war in Ukraine is expected to cause another record in the number of forced migration to Germany in 2022 (BAMF, 2021).

German statistics on refugees' labour market integration show that the refugees arriving since 2015 find employment slightly faster than in previous years (Brücker et al., 2019). The IAB-MAMF-SOEP survey shows that 19% of refugees arriving in 2015 found a job two years after their arrival and 40% of refugees of working age were employed by October 2019. However, in general, refugees take a longer time to find a job than other migrants. For instance, 55% of refugees and 85% of other migrants had found their first job five years after arrival in Germany (Brücker et al., 2019). Evidence on the actual integration of refugees in labour markets is complicated by the fact that refugees are not reported separately in labour market statistics. Results of a representative panel survey among refugees show that employment rates have been increasing to more than 50% for those who arrived between 2013 and 2016 (Brücker et al., 2019, 2020). In 2018, there was no difference in the employment rates of refugees with approved or rejected asylum applications, but the latter work mostly in low-skill and less well-paid jobs (Brücker et al., 2019). Challenges remain, especially regarding wage gaps (55% of the average German earnings) and job placement (30% of those working full time were overqualified, 25% underqualified), as well as gender issues, specifically that female refugees are significantly less integrated into the labour market (Brücker et al., 2019). In the city under study, Stuttgart, the overall employment rate was slightly higher for people with German citizenship (62.2%) than for migrants and refugees (53.5%, not differentiated) in 2021 (Stuttgart Statistics Office, 2022).

Given the crucial importance of the business sector in refugee integration, one might wonder why there is little known about these actors and why companies are not present in refugee integration debates. We, therefore, want to contribute to this debate and to fill the knowledge gaps on the role of the private sector in refugee integration, and specifically answer the questions, (i) what the motivations behind the engagement of private companies in refugee integration are; (ii) what the major challenges and opportunities of private companies in refugee integration are; and (iii) what the lessons learned regarding the inclusion of refugees and collaborations between companies and other stakeholders in the labour market integration of refugees are. The study explores two types of companies, (a) large multinational companies including (automotive and high-tech companies); (b) family-owned small to medium businesses (*Mittelstand*) which included (private social sectors, suppliers to the automotive industries, architecture and engineering companies). The study is conducted in the city of Stuttgart which is a special case not only as an economically strong region and home to global industries, but also in representing a constructive social and political environment in migration. The city has a very progressive integration department, which was established with the adoption of an integration policy in early 2001, several years prior to the German National Integration Plan (Stuttgart city council, 2016).⁵

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Recent studies have noted the engagement of private companies and their important role in the labour market integration of refugees⁶ in Germany, as well as policy advocacy for generous legal rights and access to work permits (Brücker et al., 2020; Neis et al., 2018) in addition to the influential role of the business sector on refugees' lives beyond the labour market in Europe, Africa and Middle East (Menashy & Zakharia, 2020; Müller, 2021; Strachan, 2021). Private companies have mostly funded refugee initiatives and implemented technical and professional training, including job preparation, internships and other training measures (Müller & Schmidt, 2016). Since providing professional technical integration services is costly for small and medium enterprises, the authors suggested qualification and training associations, to meet the expected future labour market demand of private companies by providing professional trainings for skilled workers (Müller & Schmidt, 2016). There are factors that either incentivize or disincentivize the engagement of a private company in the integration of refugees into the labour market. Economic and institutional incentives might have been among the driving factors behind private companies' engagement and the relaxation in the restrictive labour market policies that has been gradually occurring since 2014 (Arcarons et al., 2015). Inclusion of the private sector in migration and integration dialogues and emphasis on the importance of their engagement, and the call for their support could motivate private companies even further. However, bureaucratic obstacles remain

in place which continue to discourage German employers from employing asylum seekers and refugees (Arcarons et al., 2015). While the same author suggests that the labour market integration of asylum seekers is a long and difficult process, most of their findings have since become obsolete due to rapidly changing legal premises (Arcarons et al., 2015). Regulations that exist at the national level are often ambiguous, leaving room for interpretation at the municipality level. However, studies have found that actors working for municipalities often perceive themselves as powerless. For instance, district municipalities have pictured themselves “as being stuck in a pattern of passivity” (Schammann et al., 2021 p.2910). Additionally, evidence from Heimann et al. (2021 p.12) showed that some merely limited themselves to reporting the existing situation and voluntary activities. We assume that both the discursive environment and actual integration practices influence actors' opinions and influences how integration policies are coined. For instance, the debate by the German Immigration Commissions in 2001 on the benefits of labour migration influenced the self-perception of Germany as an immigration country, which became evident in the development of its migration policies in 2007 and the liberalisation of these policies in the following years (Boswell & Hampshire, 2017 p.147). Since 2015/2016, the discourse on refugees and integration has changed from refugees are to be protected not integrated, to refugees as a solution to the skills shortage (Fachkräftemangel) (Schammann, 2017). Many believe that it was the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her migration initiatives that played an important role in changing this discourse on refugees as well as practical engagement of the different actors including the private sector in the integration process of refugees. The collaboration of public and civil society with private companies in the labour integration initiatives and the existence of employment-related policies such as employment toleration (Beschäftigungsduldung) or vocational training toleration (Ausbildungsduldung)⁷ are essential for creating sufficient incentives for private companies to engage further. Our case study, Stuttgart, is a progressive city when it comes to migrant and refugee integration. For instance, the term *newcomer* or *new Stuttgarter* is used for everyone coming to Stuttgart, irrespective of whether one originally comes from Berlin or Baghdad. Moreover, the city is the leading member of a German city network which includes the commissioners of 50 bigger German cities working on integration (Heimann et al., 2021). The local municipal climate on integration initiatives is so well-established that even the members of the right-wing populist parties such as the AFD (Alternative für Deutschland) do not argue against it. One may hypothesise that if the political and social discourse depicts refugees as a solution to demographic challenges and skill shortages, it might incentivize the private sector to engage in their integration. If in turn the discourse depicts refugees as competitors to native unemployed or low-skilled workers, it might disincentivize many societal actors from engaging in integration. Moreover, actual practices of street-level bureaucrats and implementation of public programmes also influence actors' decisions and policies (Dahlvik, 2017; Hjörne et al., 2010). In Stuttgart, the immigration office (*Ausländerbehörde*) is very restrictive, for example regarding deportations. There are several reports criticising the Stuttgart Immigration Office, namely by the Stuttgart Chamber of Crafts about deportations of refugees in vocational training despite the residence permit promise from the Federal Government (Burry 2017)⁸ and the strong condemnation by a parliamentary group in the Stuttgart Municipal Council for the deportation of a well-integrated refugee who was arrested by the police in the Immigration Office and transferred to the deportation centre. Moreover, a parliamentary group has warned that refugees might lose confidence in the immigration office and will not attend their appointments properly (Stuttgarter Zeitung 2016).⁹ This is in stark contrast to the progressive integration office in the city. The two organisational units are strongly separated institutionally from each other in Stuttgart. In several counties and towns in Stuttgart's vicinity, that is Böblingen, the immigration authority and the tasks regarding integration have been reorganised as one new office for immigration (Appendix A).

DATA AND METHODS

For this study, a qualitative exploratory case study approach is applied and principles of Grounded Theory are utilised (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The joint data collection, coding and analysis helped us decide what additional data to collect. Initially, scientific and grey literature, online project documents, project flyers and company websites were

reviewed for details on existing public and private initiatives. Purposive and snowball sampling were then applied to select respondents. The key actors, including public and private actors and partnerships between the two, including the Integration Policy Department of the City Council, the Stuttgart Community Foundation (CF), the Chamber of Commerce (CoC), the Training Campus (*Ausbildungscampus*), and integration managers, who were involved in the refugee integration programmes were consulted and interviewed. With the above-mentioned actors' support, private companies involved in refugee integration initiatives were identified and a total of 35 private companies were emailed with the research objective and interview guideline attached. Three companies were contacted by the CF on our behalf. We received positive feedback from 17 actors, including eight private companies/corporates and nine experts and key actors with whom we conducted in-depth interviews with private companies, experts and representatives of public and CSOs (see Table 1). Our interview partners were often holding leading positions such as manager, deputy or department director, or head of vocational training. Moreover, we got insights into 39 survey responses on the experiences of public, private and civil society actors on the integration of refugees in southern Germany. The survey was sent to an email list of the 200+ city actors involved in refugee matters in the city (the first author was in the email list). We received 39 responses, whereof 63% from the public sector, 7% from the private sector, 15% from CSOs and the rest from individual experts and volunteers. The survey responses helped us understand the initiatives and design the interview guideline we used for our in-depth interviews with the private companies.

Interviews were conducted between September 2020 and May 2021 in German or English with a duration of 50 minutes to two hours. All interviews were recorded. Memos were written and emergent findings were discussed by the first two authors. The interview data were coded using MAXQDA in order to categorise the codes under specific themes and categories. Data analysis was made by summarising the main arguments and the important themes (Appendix A).

A few qualifications must be made regarding the data collected. First, the size of our sample was small. Moreover, we received more feedback from those companies and individuals who were actively involved in the refugee supporting initiatives. Furthermore, our findings might also be influenced by a gatekeeper bias. This is due to the fact that some of the interviewees were chosen and contacted through the coordinating member of an initiative. One of the potential reasons behind the knowledge gap on the role of private companies in refugee integration is the difficulty in accessing companies for interviews and their refusal to participate and share data. This has also been reported by Müller (2021). The first author's practical work experience in the integration of refugees, her observations as a participant in events and meetings, and her contacts to the gatekeepers were very useful assets to make this study possible.

TABLE 1 Profile of the expert interviewees and the types of services

Participants ID	Type of company/organisation	Type of service	No. of interviewees	No. of interviews
021, 027, 023	(a) family-owned small and medium businesses "Mittelstand"	Employment/ vocational and professional training	4	3
024, 025, 028	(b) large-scale international business enterprises	Technical vocational training, funding, donations, employment	4	3
022, 026	Chamber of Commerce (CoC)	Training/employment and coordination	2	2
030, 033, 035, 036, 037	Civil Society Organizations and individual experts	Reception and onsite integration services, advocacy, professional and language training, policy research	5	5
020, 029, 032, 034	Public-Private Partnerships (PPO)	Advocacy, partnership coordination, training, and employment	5	4
Total			20	17

Source: Authors.

Due to these restraints and biases, it is important to note that the findings are not representative of small-to-medium private companies in Stuttgart, let alone Germany.

We organise our results according to engagement, motivations and lessons learned to answer the questions we raised. While presenting the results we compare the opportunities, and challenges of large and small to medium-sized family-owned companies, since we found substantial differences between these two groups. The importance of private companies' engagement and the lack of their engagement were pointed out by the literature but gaining knowledge from the Stuttgart case study, we add on the practical challenges and opportunities of private companies' engagement.

RESULTS

PRIVATE COMPANIES' ENGAGEMENT

The results are based on the in-depth interviews, with the actors summarised in Table 1. They included private companies (family-owned and international companies), the Chamber of Commerce, CSOs, public-private partnerships and individual experts. Our results show that private companies in Stuttgart have engaged in very diverse activities, including providing vocational training and qualification programmes, employment, and funding, policy advocacy, supporting refugees in acquiring legal status, finding housing and in daily social support.

Initiatives for technical vocational training

Private companies' engagement has increased during 2015/16 and since then companies have proactively engaged in the integration of refugees. Our interview partner from a high-tech company stated:

During 2015, we were a bit helpless because nothing was regulated and clear, and no one exactly knew what to do and how. In August 2015 we invited someone from the government and told them that we want to join in supporting refugees. We collected the contacts of potential partners with whom we could work together.

#028

The most common type of engagement of both large international and family-owned companies was training refugees for labour market inclusion. Our findings show that the interviewed large companies have primarily engaged in technical and professional training of refugees through different public-sector or civil-society initiatives. The automotive industry and high-tech companies had all taken part in the government-initiated training programme called "Entry-level Qualification" (EQ)¹⁰ to train refugees in a 6–12-month professional training programme aiming to prepare refugees for the labour market.

An example of a multi-sector job training initiative is the Ausbildungscampus Stuttgart¹¹ (Campus hereafter), a non-profit association jointly established by private companies, civil society, public actors, and private persons in April 2017. The directing board of the Campus includes two representatives of large private companies, two from the public sector, one from a CSO, and two individual experts. The Campus was an initiative of the Stuttgart Community Foundation¹² (CF) which was mainly financed by private companies in its initial phase. The local government joined later in financing it. The initiative was mentioned as a best practice example of public-private civil society cooperation to support young refugees' integration into the labour market through providing vocational training, internships, and employment. The Campus was a response to the "chaotic situation" during the increased arrival of refugees in 2015/16 when "thousands of people needed support." The CF started roundtables, assembling all stakeholders,

including the public and private sector and CSOs as potential partners who could be involved in refugee integration. The CF reported that the private companies joined the Campus voluntarily as stakeholders with high motivation and the commitment to contribute with money, know-how, and ideas.

I think in Stuttgart the cooperation is working really well. The Campus is the optimum of the cooperation between all three sectors.

#028

The stakeholders believed that the outstanding characteristic of the initiative was that it did not only bring the resources of all stakeholders together but also guaranteed physical meetings of stakeholders. An interview partner involved in this initiative mentioned:

The Ausbildungscampus is a meeting point for refugees and all sectors who have something to do with the integration. It connected us all, brought us all under the same roof, shortened our way, and we made personal contacts. We spare a lot of time, nerves, money, and resources.

#026

Another interviewee referred to the novelty of the initiative as a “one-stop shop” #26, that reduced bureaucratic procedures for the newcomers. Moreover, the presence of private companies as founding members of the Campus helped to shape the objectives of the Campus based on what the companies demanded in the labour market. An interviewee referred to this point:

The private companies [founding members of the Campus] help in considering the needs of employers, with which the Ausbildungscampus can adapt its offers accordingly.

#025

The success of the Campus was also that they were able to flexibly react to new developments. Initially, the main focus was on facilitating employment, later on, they realised that new arriving refugees needed proficiency in German language and technical training, so the focus was changed to “training and employment.” There has also been a shift in the Campus' target group. Initially solely focussing on young refugees with “good prospects to stay in Stuttgart” and later including “everyone”; since there were not many arrivals anymore, they could serve more people and realised that those without good prospects to stay also required support. Some interviewees referred to the need for further improvements in the Campus, for instance, its finance method and the necessity for more creative solutions to the dynamics of the labour market.

In addition to participating in the joined initiatives above, some private companies started their own initiatives such as volunteering in their localities, donating, supporting refugees with job application preparation, CV writing, preparation for job interviews, and consultations on the German job market.

Employment

The private companies were training refugees either for the external job market or for self-employment. It was mostly the small- and medium-sized companies who were employing refugees due to skills shortage and were happy to employ refugees who participated in the technical qualification trainings. The large international companies rarely recruited refugees and were mostly training for the external job market without planning to recruit them. For instance, many of the automotive and high-tech companies who were taking part in the “Entry-level Qualification” initiative rarely employed the trainees after their training. These companies were primarily responding to the governments call

for their engagement in the integration of refugees due to their potential and structure for technical and professional training. However, they often had no shortage of skilled labour to be filled by recruiting refugees and have high requirements for getting an apprenticeship or employment position. A few of them mentioned that the intention in the first place was to be a trainer not an employer. An interview partner from an automotive company said:

We said from the beginning that we as a company don't employ or give vocational training to everyone who joins our [EQ] training. We will place them in other companies, e.g. in our partner or supplier companies. For instance, we have placed almost all our training participants in different companies.

#028

Nevertheless, small and medium companies openly mentioned the skilled labour shortage as a challenge and started initiatives such as "Initiative for good work"¹³ to address their lack of qualified employees. They wanted to make their workplaces more attractive for employees by branding the company as a "Top Employer," or by providing certificates, job exchange possibilities, training, and networking facilities for participating companies.

We observed that the two company types faced very different challenges in their engagement. For instance, the insecure residence permits and bureaucratic procedures in the public sector that mostly discouraged the medium and small companies from employing refugees were rarely mentioned by the large companies. The large companies reported rather good experiences in their cooperation with the public sector. An interviewee from an international company said:

We often hear about bad experiences with the public sector, but we have a very good cooperation with them. They all work very fast, are very flexible, and pragmatic.

#024

What was challenging for the big companies was the inconsistent refugee employment policies in different states across Germany. For instance, an interviewee stated:

I am in contact with the different state agencies across the country. There are 40 different types of rules and regulations across 16 states across Germany. As an individual company, if you are active across different states, you get to know how difficult and different it is.

#24

The interview partners, from small and medium companies often complained about the public sector bureaucratic procedures and the difficulty to access the public service points:

The apparatus in the city is too bureaucratic. I cannot fill out 10 forms, invest too much time, and do too many applications.

#02

The caseworkers in the immigration office have their legal paragraphs, but also a lot of freedom (Spielraum) if they want to help.

#023

Furthermore, insecure residence permits often caused a "vicious cycle" that many of the interviewees from small and medium companies touched upon. This is illustrated by the following quote:

*Employer: We only issue the contract if the refugee receives an extension to the Duldung [so-called Toler-
ation for Vocational Training/ Employment purposes (Ausbildungs-/Beschäftigungsduldung)] Foreigners'
Office: "We need the contract!" Employer: "We need the visa!" They keep returning the ball to each other!*

#030

The small and medium companies often lacked confidence in the employment of refugees due to the bureaucratic procedures and information gap on the existing support programmes for companies that employ refugees. The coordinator of a public service point mentioned companies' lack of information about their services as "the biggest challenge" for them. The interviews showed a more nuanced picture; the large international companies were much more informed about existing public support. In contrast, some of the small and medium companies used informal channels for recruiting refugees. For instance, a company representative who employed five refugees from her neighbouring reception centre asked us during the interview what status her employees should have. However, she was fully confident that the social worker introduced the "right people" to her.

Certain challenges were common for both large and small to medium-sized family-owned companies. For instance, the lack of collaboration among different stakeholders involved in the refugees' labour market integration caused "double efforts" or "parallel supporters" for the same participants such as two or several job applications for one applicant through different channels. Moreover, interviewees from both company types reported that they realised it was "too early" for some refugees to be employed or start the vocational training because they required a "very high support effort." Furthermore, refugees' lack of information about the apprenticeship and employment system was brought up by both company types. The following statements illustrate this:

There is a high desire for university studies, not vocational training. They [the refugees] need to be informed that the level of income between university and apprenticeship graduates is only slightly different, for example. But refugees mostly don't know that. They did not have this system in their home countries. The vocational training is similar to a bachelor's degree. That is not clear to many.

#022

Our findings on the solutions and strategies for employment show that both international and family-owned companies have emphasised the "tolerated permits" as the solution to the insecure resident permits for their trainees or employees. Some mentioned possibilities such as the "3 + 2 regulation"¹⁴ that helped them get legal support, and a few emphasised the importance of engagement in employing refugees.

Funding and donations

Financing the Campus was the most popular joint funding project among the interviewed companies. The Campus was initially planned with an annual budget of 400.000€ for two rounds with three years each. The budget was predominantly paid by the four largest private companies and partly by the city council in its second round.

Ausbildungscampus is an initiative that was not possible without the private companies' financial support. The initiative would not have been created without these four big companies.

#024

Several private companies including banks, provided donations for associations and language centres, for cultural and social initiatives supporting refugees. Some donated for refugees with low prospects for staying in Germany who would otherwise not get the chance to participate in the government-provided language courses. Moreover, companies had initiatives to raise funding from their employees or encourage them to support refugees by volunteering in the reception centres or by mentoring refugees for labour market access. There was a company that collected donations and then doubled the donated amount which supported several initiatives including many refugee integration initiatives.

Advocacy

In addition to training, employment, and funding, private companies have been advocating for "fair asylum policies" in the region. This included policy advocacy at the national and local level, as well as advocacy for individual refugees

employed by them. An interview partner emphasising the importance and effectiveness of the private companies' voice mentioned:

We were the first company who supported the popular statement "We manage it" or "Wir schaffen das" of Chancellor Merkel and had a strong and concrete position in supporting the idea that it is possible.

#024

Private companies advocated for refugees work and residence permit issues either jointly or individually. For instance, with the active involvement of the CoC, an Advisory Board¹⁵ was created in 2019 to advocate companies' wants at the national policy level. Besides, many companies, including medium and large automotive, high-tech companies and migrant-led companies had individually stood up for their refugee employees, who either had work permit issues or their asylum applications were rejected. This included individual calls to the immigration office and other public sector offices mostly for either residence or work permit issues. Some employed lawyers for their employees, and others made appeals to the court that ended successfully:

We initiated a court case for our employee and participated in court hearings. I started it myself personally. The initiative started when his asylum application was rejected, and he had to leave the country. We brought other actors such as the landlord and a refugee supporting NGO together and appeared in the court and finally got one-year subsidiary protection for him.

#023

Companies used different possibilities to advocate, although advocates were often individuals within the companies. The family-owned companies brought other actors such as landlords and NGOs and filed an application themselves while the large international companies got support from their company lawyers as the following quote describes:

There were two vocational trainers whose asylum applications got rejected and they had to leave the country. But I [the department head] informed myself about solutions and tried to help them by talking to the lawyers, and both could actually stay in Germany... We as a company did not actively participate in the process.

#025

Various interview partners emphasised the role of private companies in the existence of the policies such as "Tolerated Stay for Vocational Training" which did not exist before 2015. The regulations were mentioned to be "far too restrictive" and the necessity for more possibilities for securing the residence permits of already trained and employed refugees were mentioned. The following statement indicates the reason and the important role the private companies played:

During 2015 private companies were encouraged and were invited to join in integrating refugees. The private companies started training and employing many refugees whose asylum applications were still in process. After one to two years, when BAMF started to announce the asylum results, many were rejected and had to leave the country ("Ausreisepflichtig"). Many companies had actually hired refugees, trained them and then in 2018/2019 many of them were not successful in getting a residence permit (after sometimes year-long court cases), so they were in danger of getting deported. The companies did not accept that their efforts were in vain and protested.

#022

Nevertheless, few interviewees mentioned that their companies were not interested in advocating for refugees at the policy level, as highlighted in the following quote:

We keep ourselves out of politics when possible. We might of course have our position on supporting refugees who have gone through the first steps successfully and have done vocational training or jobs, and should not be deported. But I am not aware of any statement that went out from our company.

#028

As the quote stated, there were often individuals within companies who were advocating for refugee rights to residency or work permits.

PRIVATE COMPANIES' MOTIVATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT

In this chapter, we summarise the main incentives that companies reported. The arrival of an unprecedented number of refugees/asylum seekers to Germany during 2015/2016 was mentioned as causing not only the participation of many private companies in refugee matters but also innovative initiatives from the private companies themselves. Some stated that they started joint initiatives on refugee integration and social cohesion such as "Working Group Migration and Training¹⁶". Some companies reported "*coming closer*" to each other and increased cooperation and collaboration in social matters.

The biggest challenge during 2015 was that we did not know other actors. It was like "we were parked in the dark". With time, we tackled the challenges by getting to know other actors. We did joint events together, joint information sessions, and worked together. We can say that we established an alliance and used it as an opportunity to solve each other's issues.

#026

Different factors motivated private companies. For instance, the discursive environment that there is a need for private companies' support, corporate social responsibility, offsetting skills shortage, and refugee's competitiveness for certain jobs. It was commonly noted across respondents from private companies of all sizes, that they had the feeling they were doing "something good" by engaging in refugee integration. Social responsibility was a major motivating factor for companies to engage in integration activities, one repetitively heard from almost all interview partners from large companies.

The reasons for our engagement are very easy. It is for social and political contribution "Gesellschaftspolitischer Beitrag" and not any other specific reason.

#025

Besides that, some stated that their engagement in the different refugee support initiatives will be positive for the reputation of the company, showing the company as a society-friendly and social employer. This is illustrated by the following quote from an employee of a high-tech company:

...We don't want to be seen solely as an employer to employ people when we need them but to be part of the civil society. We believe that in a few years it will no longer be enough to provide a working position with a salary for an employee. We already see that it is important for young people with a university degree how a company deals with society.

#028

Another incentive for engagement in labour market initiatives was skills shortage which was mostly pointed out by medium-sized technical and social service companies as well as SCOs collaborating with the private companies. An interview partner stated: *"The lack of a qualified labour force in the field of engineering and architecture was recognized by our company's leadership."*

Some companies have challenges in finding vocational trainers for technical jobs. There could be 100 different reasons. Many were very wild to get refugees as vocational trainees.

#028

Ultimately, one repeatedly mentioned motivating factor for companies was refugees' high motivation for learning and working. Many regarded refugees as assets and admired their respectfulness, their potential for understanding cultural differences, their gratitude, enrichment, patience, and tolerance.

LESSONS LEARNED

The call for help encouraged many private companies to engage in and help create a more positive discursive environment, which was good in theory, but still they could have been better guided on where to practically engage. Private companies were called to help but in early 2015, in practice "nothing was clear" and companies did not know "what to do exactly."

Concerning the employment of refugees, the experts and interview partners from bigger companies, who often providing training, believed that refugees should be employed by small and medium companies, including migrant-led companies, because they often face skills shortage and refugees would have more chance for one-to-one contact and the opportunity to speak their native language which might facilitate their integration into the labour market faster and easier.

The small and medium family-owned companies complained of the bureaucratic processes, lack of information, and lack of transparency in the legal and administrative procedures for refugee employment, while the larger companies were better connected with the public sector and faced little to no bureaucratic process in their activities. In other words, the bigger companies got easier access to the public sector although the small and medium companies needed it more. To solve this issue, the public sector may provide specific contact persons for specific topics such as legal issues, work permits, finance, and accommodation-related topics to give the small and medium companies the access and possibility to solve their matters easily. Furthermore, simplifying the bureaucratic procedures was recommended, as well as familiarising companies with the regulatory and administrative procedures for refugee employment. The family-owned companies recommended information sessions on the refugees' employment support for companies, the different status of refugees, types of work permit, and information on the employment support programmes provided by different public and private stakeholders.

The CoC, a non-governmental corporation, has played an important role as a bridging institute, connecting private companies and the public sector. The CoC initiatives on labour market integration were Caretaker (Kümmerer)¹⁷ and KAUSA Service Point¹⁸ that were financed by the public sector and supported private companies and refugees by providing counselling sessions, administrative support, preparation for employment and technical training.

Finally, some companies realised that refugees needed better language skills before they were employed as trainees. The training coordinator of a company stated:

We now realize that refugees should not have started technical training that early! It was initially the wish for both sides. Companies as well as refugees, wanted to start vocational training as soon as possible. We should keep in mind that people were in the migration process during the last 5-7 years

and have migrated through different countries, interrupted biographies... they need time to repeat math, learn German terms, etc.

#022

The lesson learned was the necessity to equip refugees with more technical language training before employing them as vocational trainees.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

An increasing number of public and private actors, CSOs, and individual volunteers have taken part in supporting refugees in Germany since 2015/16. In this exploratory qualitative approach, we studied the role of private companies in supporting the labour market integration of refugees in the German city of Stuttgart. Our findings show that the private companies who participated in this research, have proactively engaged in the integration of refugees, and their engagement has increased with the arrival of refugees during 2015/2016. The private companies mostly contributed by providing training and internships and offering apprenticeships and employment. Some large companies provided funding for the integration initiatives, and others were active in policy advocacy for refugees' labour market access which was also noted by Neis et al. (2018), and Brücker et al. (2020). We found examples of initiatives by private companies such as initiating partnerships with each other, with CSOs and with the public sector, for the goal of qualifying refugees for work, actively offering support to the public sector where needed, organising solidarity campaigns, and fighting against racism.

The case study teaches us that the discursive environment in Stuttgart has been positive for a long time, and the call on private companies for engagement by the German government during 2015/16 and the feeling of social responsibility were among the main drivers that further motivated companies to participate. Our findings show that the collaborations of the public sector and civil society with the private companies were very useful in labour market initiatives. It is worth mentioning that the initiatives of individuals within large as well as small to medium private companies have played very important roles in the company's decisions on whether to engage, to what extent and on what themes.

Our results might have been completely different if the study was undertaken in a different region of Germany. We caution against generalising our findings to other German cities since Stuttgart is a special case, not only with high economic potential and employment opportunities, but also because of its inductive discursive environment and its special political culture. Our findings might not represent small and medium family-owned companies in Germany since our interview partners came from already engaged companies. However, the international companies are represented with more confidence since we included most of the prominent automotive industries in our sample.

In line with Zakharia & Menashy (2018; p.65) who described private companies as "high-profile policy actors," almost all interviewed companies have engaged in some sort of advocacy for their employee's legal status and work permits. Besides that, many have advocated for a fair migration policy and more legal certainty for refugees at the regional and national levels. Müller (2021) stated that the civic and political engagement of the business sector might have the potential to transform the lives of refugees and refugee groups. Private companies showed that they did have the potential and willingness to advocate for more legal certainty for refugees and their labour market access. The work permit regulations such as toleration permits for vocational training/ employment have empowered private companies as critical decision-makers about the destiny of refugees whose asylum applications were rejected and would have had to leave Germany otherwise. The job or vocational training contracts provided by the companies have given failed asylum applicants the chance to stay.

There was a difference between the large multinationals and small and medium companies in the extent and level of their advocacy for refugee employees/trainees; the large international companies being less active in practice. One reason could be that they were doing short-term, project-based training programmes for refugees. Thus, refugees

were considered interns to them and not employees. In case of deportation, they were not losing an employee, in contrast to the small and medium companies who were therefore practically more active at the political advocacy level. Some trainees of big companies had to leave the country due to the rejection of their asylum applications. The big companies mostly did not do what the small and medium ones did, such as taking the case to the court or uniting other stakeholders such as civil society actors to appeal or contact the immigration office for possible solutions. In a few cases, the training officers in the large multinational companies reported the case to the company lawyers, the lawyer wrote a letter of appeal to the court, and they were not aware of what happened afterwards. Another reason could be that the skills shortage was not an issue for large multinationals while it was for the small and medium companies.

This study does not challenge the broader literature on the role of small and medium companies. In our case study, the bureaucratic obstacles were recognised as discouraging factors for their engagement. However, this does not mean, that small and medium companies in Stuttgart did not do anything to overcome the bureaucratic procedures. There were examples of these companies challenging bureaucracy by partnering with different stakeholders and, through their associations, advocating for the refugee's residence and work permits. There were examples of private social enterprises that challenged the immigration office regarding prohibitive bureaucratic procedures as well as to stop deportation. For instance, a company reported asking immigration office employees not to limit themselves to their "legal paragraphs" and to use their "room to maneuver" to extend the residence permits of the company's asylum-seeking employees. Another example was a case which was taken to court successfully. As a result of their practical efforts, the employees who had to otherwise leave the country got residence permits based on their job contracts.

The results of the companies' engagements could be further differentiated according to the nature of their engagement. Companies of both types have engaged in local politics and have, for instance, advocated for an easier access to the labour market. The typical examples were public statements, such as supporting Chancellor Merkel's popular statement of "we will manage it! / *Wir schaffen das!*" Some companies even organised campaigns for solidarity with refugees and against racism. It is remarkable, however, that particularly the large multinational companies have not gone so far as to utilise their lobbying power for changing German refugee policies on any government level or even specific bureaucratic decisions on street level. On the contrary, it was the small and medium companies who stood up against deportations of refugee employees. For instance, a deportation case was taken to court and the employee received residence and work permit based on the contract from the company.

Another interesting aspect was the framing of these political or social engagements and advocacy. For instance, the large multinational companies mostly framed their engagement as corporate social responsibility. However, small and medium companies were advocating the idea of rescuing their employees who had been invested in, were ready to work but were lined up to be deported. There was no evidence that private companies were truly acting out of humanitarian reasons. Instead, their engagement served their business interests.

In agreement with the OECD survey results where 70% of the employers emphasised that stable residence and work permits were important to them (OECD, 2017), the legal uncertainty, work permit related bureaucratic issues (Khan-Gökkaya & Mösko, 2020; OECD, 2017) and restrictive procedures of public sector bureaucrats on one hand, and the unfamiliarity of the private companies with the employment system and the existing facilitating policies for refugees on the other, were the main discouraging factors for the engagement of the private companies. In agreement with a study by Dahlvik (2017), where the street-level bureaucrats played important roles in the process of asylum application and refugee status determination at micro and meso-level, the actual practices in Stuttgart also influenced the decisions of private companies for engagement in the refugee initiatives.

Based on our research, we suggest that a publicly available map of the actors and initiatives related to the labour market integration of refugees by the city council would help to make existing offers transparent, facilitate networking and collaboration, and avoid parallel efforts. When companies start an initiative, the already existing initiatives and the potential actors and collaborators are unclear to them. Initiatives such as the "Ausbildungscampus" have brought some transparency by bringing several actors together, but it is still unable to be a reference since not

all actors and initiatives are included. Moreover, the Campus should be more inclusive to small and medium-sized companies as they are mostly the ultimate employers of the refugees.

A central technical training system with the collaboration of public, private, and civil society would be more efficient than individual companies providing training. It would also help avoid parallel efforts and overlaps with other training programmes. For instance, the Campus could be more structured and transformed into a central training system that would not only train new arriving refugees but also the children of migrant workers, the second generations of refugees, and the non-migrant residents who may require technical and professional training for entering the job market.

We noticed that most of the initiatives for labour market integration focussed on the refugees with “good prospects” to stay in Germany. Some initiatives focussed only on recognised refugees and the participants of the technical training by the international companies were cherry-picked by the labour agency. However, those with less favourable statuses who might need support are often left behind. Future initiatives might consider this issue and identify their target group more carefully.

More research on the role of private companies in less industrial cities, while also including the views of the public and third sector about private companies' participation in the labour market integration of refugees, could provide valuable insights. Moreover, conducting an impact analysis and exploring the topic from the employees' and trainees' perspectives, specifically with a case study on training programmes undertaken by the private companies during the last few years, may also be noteworthy.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/imig.13089>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The term private companies refer to both large international businesses as well as family-owned medium and small enterprises who have participated in this research.
- ² UNHCR News: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2018/9/5babbecf4/businesses-commit-helping-refugees-thrive-new-jobs-trainings-investment.html>.
- ³ The White House Briefing Room: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/30/fact-sheet-white-house-launches-call-action-private-sector-engagement-0>.
- ⁴ Private companies 4 Refugees | The Global Compact on Refugees | Digital platform (globalcompactrefugees.org).
- ⁵ Stuttgart City Council available: <https://www.stuttgart.de/item/show/335193/1/dept/154?language=en>.
- ⁶ “The term “asylum seeker” refers to those whose asylum applications are still under review and, “refugee” is used as a general term for persons with different types of protection status.” (Torfa et al., 2022 p.17).
- ⁷ For employment toleration, requirements include a “tolerated” status, for more than a year, not being in removal procedures, having worked full time for 18 months (part-time, for single parents), self-sufficiency for 12 months, and a certain level of German language. For the vocational training toleration, the requirements include “tolerated” status for at least 6 months and a vocational training contract (Brücker et al., 2019).
- ⁸ Mathias Bury, Stuttgarter Zeitung (2017) Kritik an Abschiebungen in der Ausbildung; Berufliche Integration von Flüchtlingen gilt ist anspruchsvoll - Bei Sprachförderung müsse nachgebessert werden, so Experten.
- ⁹ Stuttgarter Zeitung (2016) Scharfe Kritik an Abschiebepaxis; SÖS-Linke-Plus; Die Fraktion SÖS-Linke-plus protestiert gegen die Verhaftung eines Kameruners.

- ¹⁰ Einstiegsqualifizierung (EQ) available in IHK Region Stuttgart: <https://www.stuttgart.ihk24.de/fuer-unternehmen/fachkraefte-und-ausbildung/ausbildung/ausbildungsbetrieb-werden/eq-1467410?shortUrl=%2FEQ>.
- ¹¹ AusbildungsCampus available: <https://www.ausbildungscampus.org/>.
- ¹² Community Foundation available: <https://www.buergerstiftung-stuttgart.de/>.
- ¹³ Initiative for good work available: <https://www.initiative-fuer-gute-arbeit.de/>.
- ¹⁴ The Tolerated Stay for Vocational Training available: <https://www.unternehmen-integrieren-fluechtlinge.de/die-ausbildungsduldung/>.
- ¹⁵ "In 2019 the Advisory Board was created which works politically to provide good training and employment." # 022.
- ¹⁶ "The Working Group Migration and Training was founded in 2016: 200 very active companies came together, which meet twice a year, and exchange current information on integration and benefits for companies." #022.
- ¹⁷ Integration through vocational training - Perspektiven für Zugewanderte (Kümmerer-Programm): Ministerium für Wirtschaft, Arbeit und Wohnungsbau Baden-Württemberg (baden-wuerttemberg.de) Monitoring Kümmerer September 2020 (baden-wuerttemberg.de).
- ¹⁸ KAUSA Service Point Stuttgart: <https://www.stuttgart.ihk24.de/standortpolitik/bildungspolitik/bildungsprojekte/kausa-servicestelle-region-stuttgart-681582>.

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

The role of the private sector in refugee integration in Stuttgart.

Interview Questions:

1. Would you please shortly explain your company's engagement in the refugee reception and integration? What do you exactly do? For example, train or employ refugees, fund or donate to initiatives?

2. What is your company's motivation for the engagement in the above-mentioned activities? Are these your own initiatives or have you been invited by e.g. the city, associations or non-governmental organizations?
3. Does your company engage in political discussions/ policy debates on migration and refugee reception and integration? Why/why not?
4. As an employer, how many refugees has your company hired and what type of work do they do?
5. What status do your refugee employees have? Do you consider the status of a refugee when hiring? For example, would someone with a "Duldung" get a job at your company?
6. What are the major opportunities and major challenges you are facing with refugees as employees?
7. Do you cooperate with other sectors? For example the public sector, like the city, or civil society actors like non-governmental organizations? Would you like to name a few examples for such a cooperation?
8. Could you give us one or more examples of a particular situation in which your company had to deal with local authorities or civil society actors? This could be experiences with the "Ausbildungsduldung" or work permits.
9. According to you, what are the major opportunities and the major challenges of the cooperation with the mentioned local authorities or civil society actors?
10. What would be your recommendations for improvements to refugee integration? Where do you see the role and tasks of the private sector?